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ABSTRACT

This study examined amount and type of mother-adolescent conflict and joint decision making in predicting a syndrome of adolescent problem behavior. Subjects, 73 adolescents ages 14 to 18 and their mothers, completed measures of conflict and decision making related to everyday household routines, adolescent deviant behavior, and adolescent behavior toward others. In addition, adolescents reported their engagement in delinquency, unprotected sexual activity, and substance use. Results indicated that higher levels of conflict over adolescent deviant behavior were associated with higher levels of problem behavior, and there was evidence to suggest that conflict over everyday household routines was associated with lower levels of problem behavior. Increased proportions of joint decision making were also associated with less problematic behavior, although only slightly. Results are consistent with a model in which effective management of family conflict, including joint decision making, may play an important role in promoting adolescent autonomy and limiting the extent to which young people engage in problematic behavior. (BB)

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THE ROLE OF FAMILY CONFLICT AND JOINT DECISION-MAKING IN ADOLESCENT PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

This study examined amount and type of mother-adolescent conflict and joint decision-making in predicting a syndrome of adolescent problem behavior. 73 Black and White adolescents (58% female, ages 14-18) and their mothers completed measures of conflict and decision-making related to everyday household routines, adolescent deviant behavior, and adolescents' behavior toward others. Adolescents reported their engagement in delinquency, unprotected sexual activity and substance use. Higher levels of conflict over adolescent deviant behavior were associated with more problem behavior, and there was evidence to suggest that conflict over everyday household routines was associated with less problem behavior. Increased proportions of joint decision-making were also associated with less problem behavior, although this finding was not robust. Results are consistent with a model in which effective management of family conflict, including joint decision-making, may play an important role in promoting adolescent autonomy and limiting the extent to which young people engage in problematic behavior.

Introduction

Recent research on conflict in parent-adolescent relationships indicates that conflict often reflects normative adolescent strivings for autonomy (Allen, Aber & Leadbeater, 1990; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). In this model, some conflict is expected as adolescents experience a normal process of confronting and addressing the appropriate developmental task of individuating from their parents. Yet other research suggests a clear relation between conflict and adolescent problem behaviors, such as delinquency, substance use, sexual activity, and academic failure (Gehring, Wentzel, Feldman & Munson, 1990). This line of research focuses on the detrimental effects of conflict on family relationships and on subsequent adolescent behavior.

This paper seeks to untangle these complex relations by considering important distinctions in both the content areas of parent-adolescent conflict, and the style in which conflict is resolved. For example, conflicts over everyday household routines may hold very different meanings for parents and adolescents than conflicts over adolescents' acting-out behavior. Thus, whereas increased conflict in the latter area may be associated with increased problem behavior, a higher amount of conflict in the former area may be unrelated to, or negatively associated with, adolescent problem behavior. Similarly, the process by which conflicts are resolved may be as important as levels of conflict. This study examined the following questions:

1) Does mother-adolescent conflict over different issues differentially predict a syndrome of adolescent problem behavior?

2) In addition, does the style in which conflicts are resolved, and specifically the extent to which a joint decision-making style is employed by mothers and their adolescents, further explain problematic or non-problematic outcomes of conflict?

Method

Data from 73 adolescents and their mothers were included in the present sample. Ninth and tenth graders (ages 14-18, 58% female) were recruited through two local public school systems and were selected for risk factors including low grades, multiple absences, suspensions, and grade retention. Eighty-five percent of the teens were white, 14% were black and 1% were Native American. Forty-seven percent of the teens lived with two parents and median annual family income was $35,000.

Adolescents and their parents first completed a measure of parent-child conflict (PCC) (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) and a measure of decision-making in each area of conflict (Steinberg, 1987; Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf & Gross, 1985). Three scales assessing amount of teen-mother conflict were included in these analyses: 1) conflict about everyday household routines, 2) conflict about adolescent deviant behavior and 3) conflict about the adolescent's behavior toward other people. Four types of decision-making styles were assessed: parent-alone, youth-alone, joint and none. A measure of joint decision-making was obtained by computing the proportion of joint decisions to the total number of decisions. The presence of a syndrome of problem behaviors, previously identified by Donovan & Jessor (1985), was

calculated by standardizing and summing indices of delinquency, unprotected sexual intercourse and alcohol and marijuana use, all derived from well-validated self-report measures (Allen, Leadbeater, & Aber, 1990; Elliott, 1980; Johnston, O'Malley & Bachman, 1987; University of Virginia Institute for Substance Abuse Studies, 1990).

Results

The three types of conflict (household routines, adolescent deviant behavior and behavior toward others) were only moderately correlated with each other for both teen reports (r's range from .37 to .43, $p<.01$) and for mother reports (r's range from .32 to .48, $p<.01$). These findings suggest that the conflict measures tap different domains of a broader construct of conflict. Teen reported joint decision-making was negatively correlated with all three conflict measures (r's range from -.28 to -.34, $p<.05$); mother's reports of joint decision-making were uncorrelated with their reports of levels of conflict. Because teen and mother reports of conflict were only moderately correlated (r's range from .34 to .56, $p<.01$) -- suggesting substantial *disagreement* between teen and mother reports -- subsequent analyses were conducted separately. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the analyses examining relations among adolescent reports of conflict and decision-making with adolescent problem behavior. Levels of teen-mother conflict were significantly related to adolescent problem behavior (R-Sq.=.27, $p<.001$). Teen-mother conflict about adolescent deviant behavior showed

the strongest relationship to adolescent problem behavior (ß=.48, p<.001). High levels of teen-mother conflict about household routines were related to *decreased* adolescent problem behavior (ß=-.26, p<.05). After accounting for levels of conflict, joint decision-making accounted for a significant increment in explained variance (R-Sq. Change=.04, p<.05). Increased proportions of joint decision-making were associated with decreased adolescent problem behaviors (ß=-.23, p<.05). No interactions were significant.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the analyses examining relations among mother reports of conflict and decision making with adolescent problem behavior. Levels of teen-mother conflict were significantly related to adolescent problem behavior (R-Sq.=.17, p<.01). Teen-mother conflicts about adolescent deviant behavior showed the only relationship to problem behavior (ß=.37, p<.01); neither conflict about household routines, nor about behavior toward others had a significant multivariate relationship to problem behavior. Although joint decision-making was significantly negatively correlated to problem behavior (r=-.33, p<.01), this effect was not significant when levels of conflict were first accounted for.

Conclusions

These findings suggest that adolescent-mother conflicts about particular areas of disagreement are important factors in adolescent development. Conflicts over adolescent deviant behavior were consistently associated with more problem behaviors. There was evidence to suggest that conflict over everyday household routines was associated with

less problem behavior when adolescent reports were examined. These findings point to a need to distinguish between developmentally normative v. maladaptive areas of conflict in parent-adolescent relationships. Moreover, these findings are consistent with contemporary theories which suggest that effective management of family conflict, including joint decision-making, may play an important role in promoting adolescent autonomy and limiting the extent to which young people engage in problematic behavior. Longitudinal studies, which include observational data of parent-adolescent interaction, are needed to address the limitations of this study.

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Table 1.
Correlations among Conflict and Joint Decision Making Scales for both Teen and Mother Reports

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Household Routines	.34**	.32**	.46***	-.17
2. Adolescent Deviant Beh.	.43***	.56***	.48***	-.19
3. Behavior Toward Others	.37**	.37**	.41***	-.16
4. Joint Decisions	-.28*	-.34**	-.32**	.48***

Note: Teen reports of conflict below the diagonal (n=73); Mother reports above the diagonal (n=70). Inter-correlations on the diagonal. *p≤.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 2.
Hierarchical Regression of Problem Behavior Syndrome on Teen Reported Conflict and Joint Decision Making

Predictor	r	ß	ΔR^2	R^2
1. Household Routines	.03	-.26*		
Adolescent Deviant Beh.	.47***	.49***		
Behavior Toward Others	.21†	.05	.27***	.27***
2. Joint Decisions	-.34**	-.23*	.04*	.31***

† p≤.10; *p≤.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 3.
Hierarchical Regression of Problem Behavior Syndrome on Mother Reported Conflict and Joint Decision Making

Predictor	r	ß	ΔR^2	R^2
1. Household Routines	.05	-.13		
Adolescent Deviant Beh.	.40***	.37**		
Behavior Toward Others	.21†	.07	.17**	.17**
2. Joint Decisions	-.33**	-.18	.03	.20**

† p≤.10; *p≤.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001